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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to explore the attitudes of the Spanish-speaking people living in the United States as expressed in their prose, poetry, and drama. The scope of the paper includes the literature of Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and Mexican Americans in the United States written between 1960 and 1973. The literature is surveyed to uncover themes of the demand for social justice, cultural alienation, loneliness in exile, and disillusionment with the American Dream. But on the positive side a harmonious bilingual/bicultural spirit is seen as emerging. (Author/AM)

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CONTEMPORARY PUERTO RICAN, CUBAN-IN-EXILE, AND MEXICAN-AMERICAN LITERATURE IN A PLURALISTIC SOCIETY*

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I. The State of the Question

While estimates vary, there are several million Spanish-speaking people living within the confines of these United States. Although Spanish-speaking people are to be found throughout the United States, we generally associate the western part of this country with those of Mexican ancestry—some of whom prefer to call themselves *chicanos*. In the southeastern part of this country there are large populations of Cubans, and throughout the northern states there are large sections of Puerto Ricans. The common bond of these people is language, and there is little doubt that Spanish is gradually becoming the second language of some areas of the United States. This observable fact, by no means unique or uncommon in the history of the United States, heightens our awareness of bilingualism and its corollary biculturalism in a pluralistic society. Such situations have and can in the long run enhance and enlarge the linguistic and cultural milieu of the United States.

II. The Purpose of this Study

The purpose of this paper is to explore the attitudes of the Spanish-speaking people living here in the United States as expressed in their literary genres of prose, poetry, and drama.

I approach this endeavor as a student—a learner—who seeks to learn the many faceted directions the contemporary hispanic peoples have taken in the United States.

III. The Literary Material

It is only recently that Puerto Rican, Cuban-in-exile, and Mexican-American literature have become available to the general reading public. The scope of this paper covers the literature of the above mentioned groups written between 1960 and 1973. Usually the authors live or did live in the United States and the material was bilingual, in translation, or in Spanish. Such literature can justify its existence on its own merits, but it is also a key to understanding hispanic attitudes and values. My purpose in reading the available literature was enlightenment, understanding, insight, and appreciation of the Spanish-speaking in the United States.

It has proved to be a fascinating beginning along a road covered at times with debris, grapes, lettuce, frustration, disillusionment, drugs, hope, rebellion, *huelgas*, fiestas, contentment, and God. The road was scorched by the heat of Miami, cooled by the wintry blasts of New York, and warmed in the valleys of California.

IV. The Traveller

The Cuban patriot José Martí says that:

Yo vengo de todas partes
Y hacia todas partes voy.
(Versos sencillos, I)

But the Spanish poet Antonio Machado questions: "Where will the road lead?" ("¿Adónde el camino irá?") I hope that the conclusion of this paper will answer his question. What really intrigued me most was the challenge implicit in the often cited words of Robert Frost:

Two roads
diverged
into a wood
and I—
I took the one
less travelled by,
and that has made
all the difference.

I started my journey *Down These Mean Streets* (New York: Knopf, 1967) with Piri Thomas. His ghetto world of New York was one of crime, frustration, and finally prison. Yet from these experiences there grew the gradual awareness of his own personality and individual existence. A world of Spanish and English, of love and hate, of evil and goodness, of similarity and divergence, of crime and punishment were the constructs of this New York Puerto Rican. Yet the very fact of his survival urged Piri Thomas to author *Savior, Savior, Hold My Hand* (New York: Doubleday, 1972; rpt. New York: Bantam, 1973), in which he reaches out to his brother *puertorriqueños* only to find that society fails to give its support because of prejudice and a lack of social justice.

Another insight into the Puerto Rican's quest for survival is in the drama *The Oxcart: La carreta* (trans. Charles Pilditch. New York: Scribners, 1969. *La carreta*. 5th ed. Puerto Rico: Editorical Cultural, 1963) by Rene Marqués. In this dramatic work Marqués relates a family's life and existence in two locales of the Island—the *campo* and the *barrio*. The family then leaves Puerto Rico for New York, where disillusion, poverty, and death cause the feminine inner strength to return to the *Isla*. Marqués' dramatic production was frequently

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presented in New York to a most appreciative audience, who could easily identify with the characters he so artistically created.

But perhaps it is the young poet David Hernández who disposes of the "American Dream" as he is cited in *From the Belly of the Shark* (ed. Walter Lowenfels. New York: Vintage, 1973). "The *blancos*," writes Hernández, "think that we have melted into the American-Dream/Rages-to-Riches society, that we have disappeared in the cities. Blanco, I will show you . . . the American Dream in practice" (p. 191). David Hernández then contrasts the illusory dreams of the Puerto Ricans who seek in the United States—in this case Chicago—a better life of happiness and dignity for themselves and their children but who find only filth, hate, loss of hope, dope, and a lack of food and money. He concludes that his journey has tended toward isolation:

> no one knows me,
> i am thin like puerto rican air on the
> mountains
> i walk down the street
> and see my people waiting
> all with wooden face and boiling-lava
> feelings inside.
> no one knows me (p. 196).

In his own commentary he strikes the chord that will be reiterated by the *chicanos:* "Do you still think we should be quiet and friendly and colorful? The volcano is erupting" (p. 196).

To be sure that "no one knows me" would not be his existential condition, Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales wrote *I Am Joaquín: Yo soy Joaquín* (New York: Bantam, 1967, 1972), in which Joaquín is the personification of himself and all *chicanos:*

> lost in a world of confusion,
> caught up in the whirl of a gringo society,
> confused by the rules,
> scorned by attitudes,
> suppressed by manipulation,
> and destroyed by modern society (p. 6).

Further delusion is evidenced by:

> Here I stand
> before the court of justice,
> guilty
> for all the glory of my Raza
> to be sentenced to despair (p. 64)

The poet, however, does not suffer from a lack of identity, for he reiterates the value of his epic and its purpose:

> I am Joaquín.
> I must fight
> and win this struggle
> for my sons, and they
> must know from me
> who I am (p. 82).

Finally, the biculturalism is most evidenced in the concluding lines—a mixture of esteem and determination:

> I am Aztec prince and Christian Christ.
> I SHALL ENDURE!
> I WILL ENDURE (p. 100)!

Yet not all Mexican-American or *chicano* writing is characterized by the salient theme of the need and the demand for social justice. For example, the multi-generational stages of a Mexican-American family—the Sandovals—are episodically portrayed in Richard Vasquez's novel *Chicano* (New York: Doubleday, 1970). The longer, first part of this work depicts the struggles, failures, and successes that the partially bilingual and bicultural Sandoval family experience in their push for existence. The "harmony and affection" (p. 60) that Neftali so hoped for in his family and presumably in his decendents did not materialize. As their nine children (p. 74) eventually leave home and marry, Neftali—illiterate and only Spanish-speaking—maintains a solid equilibrium of values.

The Sandoval family is contrasted with the Mexican-American Salazar family, whose values are toughness and cleverness. Leonardo, the father of the Salazar family, is the opposite of Neftali. He [Leonardo] "spoke English quite well . . . [He] was literate, frequently quoting from Cervantes and Lope de Vega" (p. 88). Yet Leonardo killed a man in a brawl and left his family to fend for itself.

By the time Neftali "was in his late fifties" (p. 73), he and his wife doña Alicia were living alone in Southern California, where he hoped to "enjoy his grandchildren and sons and daughters to the end of his days" (p. 175).

Sandoval's children and grandchildren, on moving to East Los Angeles, met the difficulties of all minority groups: prejudice, hostility, crime, drugs, police, and the like; the dream of Neftali Sandoval of "harmony and affection" clashed with the reality of its opposite.

The concluding, second part of the novel *Chicano* becomes the story of the young Mexican-American Mariana Sandoval—a granddaughter of Neftali, whom she considered "the gentlest and kindest man I've ever known" (p. 262)—and David Steiner, an American sociology major in a university in Los Angeles.

From one point of view, the beautiful Mariana becomes the symbol of the modern *chicana* and David Steiner that of the modern college educated *anglo.* The bilingual and bicultural differences are most in evidence in this section of the novel. Briefly, Mariana is bilingual, intelligent, attractive, economically secure, but uncertain of her own cultural identification. "Actually . . . she had no culture. Her house, her parents, were barren of culture in the material sense. The family pattern of tradition, the language, everything about her was composite" (p. 266).

On the other hand, David is well educated, affluent, culturally identifiable with the United

States, and he believes himself to be free of deep prejudice. Mariana, however, thinks him dishonest in the sense that "you people [Americans] form opinions of people in advance, and then try to cover it up. It's dishonest" (p. 274).

David is career-oriented, and nothing is to deter him from assuming an executive position in his father's company. Yet there is always the hint that—taken symbolically—the two heritages will not fuse into that state of "harmony and affection."

Mariana and David fall in love, live together for a time; when she is pregnant, David arranges for an abortion. Mariana dies as a result of infection. David suppresses his emotional involvement as he returns to the university to receive his degree at graduation.

It is in this last section that the novelist confronts the attitudinal reflections of the modern young Mexican-American with the so called American "way of life." David Steiner's sociology project was to investigate the dropout educational situation of Mexican-Americans in East Los Angeles. His professor remarked that "if any of you reports back here that you've discovered the dropout problem is caused by the cultural barriers I'll personally brain you. We all know that. We want to know *what* in the cultural barrier is so insurmountable to the individual and *why*. It's complex" (p. 252). It is under this device that the story of Mariana and David unfolds; yet the end result is confusion, uncertainty, and alienation from the two heritages. The novel reflects both the similarities and differences of the Mexican-American and American traditions, but what, to my mind, the author fails to capture are the qualities that can exist—at least to some degree—among all peoples, namely: true committed love, mutual trust and toleration, and most importantly spiritual values—that area of life which transcends race, creed, or color.

Yet, I must say, Richard Vasquez's *Chicano* has brought to the printed page—even though in fictional form—the problem of survival and existence in a still somewhat primitive milieu called "Humanity." Perhaps Vasquez best expresses his contrast of hope vs. reality through the words of Mariana: "I think everybody belongs anywhere. Or at least they should. But of course that's not the way it is" (p. 277).

Bless Me, Ultima (2nd printing, 1973 California: Quinto Sol, 1972) by Rudolfo A. Anaya is one of the finest insights into the *chicano* mentality that I have read. It is not a novel that lends itself easily to summary. It is a simple and paradoxical rendering of the complex story of a young Mexican-American growing into manhood in New Mexico. The Mexican customs (p. 39), fears, superstitions, legends (p. 26), religion, as well as the American cultural milieu, are artfully woven into a beautiful mosaic of the childhood experiences, reflections, and dreams of Antonio Marez y Luna. The reader enters, as it were, into the very thoughts and dreams that are so personal and individualistic. We come to meet the other characters of the novel by their words and actions; but we come to know Antonio from the inside. Out of the chaotic process of maturation Rudolof Anaya has created a remarkable character.

One of the several literary facets that hold the reader's interest is the interweaving of contrasting tensions—tensions that are both *chicano* and universal in that they are the hallmark of excellent literary creativity. Thus, the freedom of the *llano* (the plain, p. 23) versus the stability of the farm (p. 27); the power of apparent magic (p. 87) versus the power of God (p. 98); the question of what-might-have-been (p. 62) versus the question of what is (p. 14), and finally the innocence of youth (p. 38) versus the wisdom of the experienced.

While the principal protagonists are Antonio and Ultima, a *curandera*, "a woman who knew the herbs and remedies of the ancients" (p. 4), the impact of the novel is that of a moral. Antonio's father states this underlying theme: "understanding comes with life . . . as a man grows he sees life and death, he is happy and sad, he works, plays, meets people—sometimes it takes a lifetime to acquire understanding because in the end understanding simply means having a sympathy for people . . ." (p. 237). Thus, the good can live anywhere, with anybody, at any time because they understand human nature, and their vision of life can transcend the non-essentials. Such compassion did not come easily to the emerging Antonio: "I wanted to run away, to hide, to run and never come back, never see anyone again . . . I know I had to grow up and be a man, but oh it was so very hard" (p. 55). He succeeded.

As two *chicano* writers (Herminio Rios C. and Octavio Ignacio Romano-V.) attest: "Anaya takes us from the subconscious, from the past to the present, and in doing so he makes the future not only bearable, but welcome, for he has helped us to know ourselves" (p. ix).

As my journey turns back toward those who have fled the island of sugar cane and tobacco and about which José Martí has said "de donde crece la palma," the Cuban exiles have found the vehicle of poetry an apt medium for conveying their sentiments.

The historian Herbert Herring in his *A History of Latin America* (3rd ed. New York: Knopf, 1969) sets the stage for what follows: "New Year's Day, 1959, marked the end of the long era of Batista . . . The red-and-black flags of the '26 of July' movement appeared on buildings, automobiles, trucks; portraits of the bearded Fidel Castro were placarded on walls everywhere. The young rebel was Cuba's mes-

siah" (p. 407). Furthermore: "The inevitable break in diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba came in January, 1961" (p. 412). In October, 1965, Castro made the startling offer to permit Cubans who had relatives in the United States to leave the island and join their families under certain conditions (p. 421), and "by April, 1966, more than 14,000 had flown to Miami" (p. 421). Today there are about 600,000.

Ana Rosa Núñez in *Poesía en éxodo: El exilio cubano en su poesía, 1959-1969* (Miami, Florida: Ediciones Universal, 1970) has presented us with a fascinating collection of poetry written by Cuban exiles, many of whom live in the United States. The themes of patriotism, nostalgia, love, religious devotion, suffering, loneliness, and death are most evident. In relation to Cuban-poetry-in-exile, I think that Michael True in his essay on "Poetry and Survival" (*Commonweal*, 21 December, 1973, pp. 311-315) makes two observations that are pertinent: First, that "in poetry more than in any other literary form, the writer speaks both immediately and prophetically, to time now and time future," and secondly: "So while it is true that poetry is a criticism of life, it is also a love song, an endorsement, an incantation, a hymn in praise of life" (p. 311).

For my purpose, I wish to single out primarily the exiled Cuban's inner reflections on his own existence and identity. All of the following sentiments are taken from the above mentioned collection by Ana Rosa Núñez, and the translations are mine. I have purposely omitted the authors of the poems.

The general tenor of Cuban poetry has been well expressed by José Martí when he wrote that "antes de morirme quiero/Echar mis versos del alma." In this vein a young Cuban poet, writing from Mexico in 1960 declares that "exile is degrading and brutilizes the soul" (p. 24). And in 1961 a young man in Miami writes that "I am passioned to return,/to return free to my country. . . . I want my body to see the/ place where I was born" (p. 33). Thus at this early stage there appears little attempt or desire for bilingualism or biculturalism.

The exile's sense of loneliness is well expressed by one from Coral Gables, Florida, who states that " no one in the world loves me/and I'm going to die alone" (p. 59). Only ten years ago an exiled Cuban reflected that "exiled and a wanderer—today I feel nostalgia/and the fleeting memories of yesterday engulf me" (p. 71). In 1964 the persistent question still surfaces: "And how to be happy in exile?" (p. 87). Or the poet prays: "Lord, we are alone among millions of men" (p. 89).

In 1966 a priest in New York expressed his deep distress: "Here I feel so sad, in this strange land. . . . O Cuba, my country, I want to return to you" (p. 125). A similar sentiment comes from Miami: "I am like a tree without roots . . ." (p. 136).

By 1968, for some, there is the feeling of reconciliation in the face of an uncontrollable situation: "We are far. We live the mystery of changes" (p. 200) and "the time of our absence has grown" (p. 201).

In this same year of 1968 there is a change of attitude on the part of some in Florida, as a young man wrote: "You [Miami] are the new sanctuary of Liberty" (p. 213) and "Miami, now I could not live without you," for you are "the reality of my life" (p. 213). Yet our same author is, paradoxically, spiritually as well as physically exiled: "At times I don't even know who I am/At times I even doubt my soul" (p. 214). Whereas another writer expresses himself as such: "I found refuge in . . . Miami. But it is not mine it's like the house of a friend" (p. 237). This feeling of spiritual isolation can be deeply etched into the emotional frustration of one's being: "to live without a country, is to live like a dog" (p. 250).

While there is hope: "We will return with the new word/and in our hands the seeds of hope" (p. 42), there is also despair: "Its brave race now without hope,/Disinherited, wounded, without consolation . . ." (p. 126). Yet all is not lost when one reads:

> It is only a fistful
> of earth, of mud, [i.e., from Cuba]
> that I guard and I love,
> which I brought with me
> because it is my treasure (p. 351)

The complexities of the exiled Cubans offer no easy solution. But one has to admit that José Martí (1853-1895)—that "hombre de letras y hombre de acción"—had great insight into the Cuban people when he epitomized the psychology of the Cuban mentality by observing: "Nuestro vino es agrio, pero es nuestro vino." Furthermore, I believe that the selections of poetry cited above reflect Martí's concept of this genre. As Jean Franco notes in her book *An Introduction to Spanish-American Literature* (Cambridge: University Press, 1969): "The vigour of Martí's personality is just as evident . . . in his own poetry. For him poetry was not an artifact, not something which could be considered separately from the society that produced it, for it was an expression of the collective spirit of humanity" (p. 105).

Let us now move to the genre of the novel. Celedonio González, born in the *pueblo* of La Esperanza, a province of Las Villas, Cuba, in 1923, published his first novel *Los Primos, The Cousins*, (Madrid: Flo-Rez) in 1971. Again I claim responsibility for the translation. The novel centers around the characters of Eduardo and his wife Elena and their two children in their teens, Zoilita and Gerardo. In addition, there are Arturo, a former dentist in Cuba, and Valentín, an elderly man who illegally enters

the United States. Eduardo, Arturo, and Valentín are, in the Spanish sense, cousins.

Simply stated, Eduardo, his family, and Arturo leave Cuba (pp. 21-22) shortly after the Castro takeover and settle in Miami. Eduardo's ideological persuasions impell him and his family to return to the now Castro-dominated Cuba some ten years later. While stopping over in Mexico, Eduardo meets Valentín, who has just escaped Cuba via Mexico, and he goes to live with Arturo in Miami.

Celedonia González has written a masterful book, in which he highlights some of the bilingual and bicultural situations that exist today in the United States. Eduardo does not speak English, while his children are quite fluent in both languages. And Gerardo, his son of 18 years, is most reluctant to return to Cuba because for him "the best universities in the world are here" [in the United States] (p. 194). Furthermore, he reminds his father that he hardly knew Cuba and his sister—four years younger—knew it even less. (p. 195)

Biculturally, the author notes that Eduardo and his wife left Cuba so that the "two children could grow up in a better world" (p. 29). Yet Eduardo gradually feels that "this land [the United States] would always be foreign for them" (p. 30).

Ideologically, Eduardo "continually battled with the materialistic society that surrounded him" (p. 37), and while "he didn't hate the Americans . . . [he] abhorred the capitalistic system" (p. 37). And he always hoped that some day he would return to his *patria;* as he says, "there I was born, and I will also be buried when my time comes" (p. 38).

On the other hand, Arturo adapted himself to life in the United States, but he notes that "some Cubans seemed externally to have adapted themselves; others, not Eduardo . . . belonged to this second group" (p. 54). Yet Arturo was not without his own problems—social and psychological. Each night before retiring he took "Librium" on the doctor's advice because this was better than remaining "subject to the tensions of these latter times" (p. 85). Arturo also felt that even if liberty should return to Cuba, the people would never be the same (p. 87).

When Eduardo first tells Arturo of his plan to return to Cuba, Arturo is vehemently against the idea and begs Eduardo to consider his family, especially Gerardo, who at 18 is well acquainted with life in the United States (p. 90). But Eduardo has made up his mind to return, whatever the familial consequences (p. 90). He states: "I am far from my country, here you don't defend principles or anything. This is an empire like all the rest, and it's not mine" (p. 93). Yet the author injects a thrust of realism into the narrative when he cites a passage from *Gone With the Wind:* When Ashley returns from the war, he says to Scarlett O'Hara, "When I was in prison, I thought: when the war is over, I can go back to the old life, and the old dreams, and watch the shadow show again. But Scarlett, there's no going back . . ." (p. 150). The author's technique here heightens the tension of the cultural and ideological situation in which Eduardo finds himself.

Perhaps a transition to the bicultural generation gap is appropriate at this point.

Zoilita wants to attend a school dance, but her father objects unless her mother or another chaperon accompanies the girl (p. 198). Furthermore, Eduardo reminds Zoilita that Cuban girls are not the same as American girls (p. 199). "It's not that they [American girls] are bad and the Cuban girls are good, it's that they are different, different in religion, in customs, in everything" (p. 199). "We are the same, papa . . ." the girl replies. Her father answers that the difference isn't geography, it's in the soul (p. 199), and the parents' obligation is to watch over their children (p. 199). When his daughter leaves, Eduardo reflects "how one has to struggle when one leaves his country" (p. 199).

Finally the Cuban government and the American government grant permission for Eduardo's family to return to Cuba (pp. 239, 249). Arturo can reflect only that Cuba is no longer Eduardo's country and that he [Eduardo] "is dreaming about something that only exists in his imagination'" (p. 236). Later Eduardo finally clarifies his deep desire to return to Cuba; it is to make others aware that "the most essential part of man is his liberty" (p. 265).

When Valentín and Eduardo cross paths in Mexico, the latter is astounded to learn that after some nine years in the United States, Eduardo is returning to Cuba (p. 276).

In contrast to Eduardo's decision, the old Valentín on arriving in Miami to live with Arturo can say: "I left the wellspring, and today I can say that I live in the most advanced country in the world, where there are more chances for the young people, where you work, but you see the fruit of your sacrifice, not like them" [i.e., those in Cuba] (p. 290).

Yet Eduardo's move has affected the lives of both Arturo and Valentín, for now the formerly apathetic Arturo decides to propagate Eduardo's ideals as if they were his own, and Valentín agrees to help him (pp. 301, 304). And so these three—the cousins—Eduardo, Arturo, and Valentín, while they had a common place of origin, La Esperanza, provincia de las Villas, Cuba (p. 307), also conclude that: "the *worst thing is* . . . that the three of us are right" (p. 308).

V. From the Notebook of a Travelling Student

After these scenes of Spanish Harlem, Chicago, the *barrios* of the Southwest, the missions

of Old Spain, the cactus, and the palm trees of Florida, I would like to be able to reiterate and make my own the sentiments of José Martí:

Yo soy un hombre sincero

. . . . . .

Y antes de morirme quiero
Echar mis versos del alma.

My notebook records some very tentative literary impressions of the Puerto Rican, Mexican-American, and Cuban literature thus explored.

On the negative side, I have found:

1. A lack of social justice in both cultures.
2. The disillusionment with the American Dream.
3. A lack of appreciation for hispanic values, and
4. A lack of effort at adaptation.

On the positive side, I have noted:

1. The emergence and recognition of bilingual literary talent.
2. The increasing awareness of the dignity of the hispanic heritage and its accompanying language.
3. The characteristic of a determination to seek self-identity.
4. The emergence of a beginning of bilingual and bicultural assimilation in a spirit of harmony and affection, and
5. A maintenance of transcendental values, which indicates the optimism of the spirit.

May I conclude by saying that I have chosen to follow in this literary adventure, the less travelled road:

and that has made
all the difference.

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